

the curse

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the curse

by [bunflower](#)

Summary

Eret has always loved the sea.

Ever since she was little more than a child, she's always stayed close by to it. The steady roar, the lapping of the water at her toes as she stands by the shore, overlooking the rolling waves as the ships come into port. The cry of the gulls far overhead, and the cool spray as it crashes against the rocks—she knows them like she knows her own heartbeat. It calls to her, in the way that it calls to every sailor who spends their life on her waters.

But it's not the only voice she hears.

—

OR: The prequel companion to "Bones in the Ocean". The story of how Eret traded their sight for something much greater.

Notes

welcome to the official prequel of "bones in the ocean"! if you haven't read bones first, i would definitely advise reading it before starting "the curse". it's not necessary, but will add a lot to your enjoyment.

i'm really excited to bring this story to you, as it's something i've been thinking about for a while! i hope you all enjoy! <3

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***chapter warnings: implications of hangings, minor character death, minor depictions of injury & starvation

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Eret has always loved the sea.

Ever since she was little more than a child, she's always stayed close by to it. The steady roar, the lapping of the water at her toes as she stands by the shore, overlooking the rolling waves as the ships come into port. The cry of the gulls far overhead, and the cool spray as it crashes against the rocks—she knows them like she knows her own heartbeat. It calls to her, in the way that it calls to every sailor who spends their life on her waters.

But it's not the only voice she hears.

She hears the murmurs of the hearts of others, the soft whispers of love and the teasing fondness of friendship. When her hand brushes the hand of her mother, she hears and *feels* her adoration for her father, and she tastes the bitterness of hard-fought survival on her tongue. When she holds her father's hand in the marketplace, she can feel the prickle of agitation in the back of his mind, the concern every time he glances back to make sure she's still at his side. She feels the warmth and excitement of the other children when they brush against her as they play in the streets, and the cold annoyance of the officer who had brought her back to her home after getting lost in the winding alleyways.

Eret listens, and Eret *feels*.

She asked her mother, once, if everyone felt this way. Her mother's face had gone pale and ghostly, her lips drawn in a thin white line as she'd pulled Eret close to her, shushing her. With shaking hands, she clutched at her child's shoulders and looked into her eyes, and made her swear to never tell anyone what she told her—to never tell anyone what she knows—to stop what she was doing right now, and to never do it again. Telling others would mean disaster. Telling others would mean *death*.

Witchcraft, her mother had said, was punishable by hanging.

Only, Eret had never studied, never practiced. She was born with magic—had always grown up feeling it. She had tried to tell her mother this, tried to assure her that it was just something that happened, that she had always felt. Her mother's anger had dulled to something sorrowful and bitter, full of confusion and heartbreak, and she'd pulled Eret into her arms with a breathy sob, holding her child tight against her chest as she cried.

“A curse,” she'd said. “*My baby is cursed.*”

Eret stopped telling others about her ability after that. She didn't want her mother to feel that way ever again, didn't want to make anyone else angry or sad—didn't want to be hanged for a crime she'd never committed, too young to even understand what death meant.

Magic, however, had other ideas.

She never stopped hearing its call.

When she was eight, she had her first brush with true witchcraft. An old woman, hiding away in her parent's shop. Eret had been the only one there—an only child, tending the shop while

her parents went to the market for supplies. The woman had stumbled in with greying hair and knobbled fingers, clutching tight to an old wooden staff. She'd looked at Eret with wide, panicked eyes, softening only slightly at the sight of such a youthful face behind the counter.

She'd asked for help. Eret had let her hide in the shop's stores, away from prying eyes. In exchange, the woman had shown her magic—tiny sparks dancing from her fingertips, a warm tingle when she'd held Eret's tiny hands in her own. The warmth not only in her heart—a soft fondness, almost motherly as she'd guided Eret through her teachings—but also in her hand. Fire danced across the weathered lines of her palm, licking and flickering but never burning, no pain echoing across as their fingers had brushed.

She'd taken the flame in her palm and passed it to Eret, who'd cradled it carefully in cupped hands, eyes wide with wonder.

It didn't burn her. It barely even felt warm.

"You have a gift," the woman had told her, with a twinkle in her eye, "—should you choose to use it. Not many take to magic so easily as you. Even fewer are born with the treasure you possess."

With wonder, Eret looked up at her and smiled.

"Magic is in all of us," the woman had said, and there's a bitterness there, a resignation—a finality in every syllable. "Some choose to answer its call. Others ignore it—rebel against it."

"Like the sea?" Eret asked.

"Like the voice of the sea," the woman had agreed. "But I have never met someone as special as you. Don't ignore it, dear one. Don't push away what you feel. *Embrace it.*"

The woman had been arrested later that day.

Eret's parents had swept her up into their arms as the woman was led away in chains, to be executed the following morning for her crimes of sorcery and witchcraft. Eret never told them what she'd been shown. She kept the secret close to her chest, and for many years, tried to forget it had ever happened at all. It was easier to dismiss it as a bad dream than to confront something that could get her killed—easier to find distractions from the tugging at the back of her mind, the call from something other than just the gulls overhead, calling her to the waves.

It doesn't stop her from noticing the cruelties. It doesn't stop her from seeing more injustice. The woman's voice echoes in her ears, never truly forgotten, and her heart cannot deny what it feels every time she meets someone new—every time she holds her mother's hand or kisses her father's cheek as he leaves for the market. She can't ignore the hangings, or the laws, or the way her mother prays every night for Eret's curse to be lifted, for her to be free of her magic.

She can't ignore what's right in front of her.

Everything changes on a cool autumn day with the sound of a bell and the shouts of her neighbors.

Everything changes when she looks at the world, and for the first time, sees it for what it truly is.

A crew of pirates brought into port in chains, shackled to one another, escorted down the cobbled streets by the Navy for public scorn on the way to their cell. A young boy with tangled blonde hair, shuffling between his parents, cheeks mottled with bruises, blue eyes wide with terror. His hands are cuffed, rubbed raw and red, and he's nestled protectively between the other pirates—the youngest of the crew by far. He's dirty and bedraggled, his shirt torn and tattered, and while the rest of the onlookers jeer and spit at their feet, Eret looks at him and finds nothing but sorrow in her heart.

He doesn't look much like a criminal, she thinks.

He looks like her.

Young. Too young, and yet aged by the strife of life, by the constant battle to survive each day. She knows this struggle—has known the pain of hunger, the burn of sickness with no medicine to be found. They have the same childish weight to their faces, the same naivety of the world—though she can feel it dying for the both of them in this moment, lost to the grim reality of what they face. For her, a painful glimpse into the injustice of the systems around her, a moment that opens her eyes to the cruelty of the world. For him, an execution.

She can't feel him—can't reach out to touch him, to grab at his hand and make the connection, but she *feels* him nevertheless. His terror is palpable, his chest hitching with panicked, uneven breaths. It matches her own, her breath stuttering in her lungs as she longs to do something, *anything* to help. She knows the fate that awaits pirates—has snuck to the gap in the walls of the execution grounds to watch many a time. This boy is going to die, and his family too—marked as a criminal, marked as a monster before he even grows to be a man. Eret looks at him and feels his helplessness, his heartbreak—and deep down, she thinks she sees yet a will to live, a little flicker of wild hope to survive this, despite all odds.

But most of all...

He turns to face her, briefly. It's only a few seconds—a quick glance to the side. It's something she's sure the boy will quickly forget, something so ordinary to him in a moment of horror and dread. He doesn't look to her and beg for help, or call out the injustice. *No*. He's silent, his chin ducked low, his eyes meeting hers and speaking only of misery and fear.

But she sees it.

They're the same. Maybe not by blood or by history or even by fate, but by something much simpler—something much more *human*.

In his eyes, even beneath the heavy weight of shackles and the shadows of bruises, she sees freedom.

In his eyes, she sees the sea.

In his eyes, she sees the sun rise.

Something precious shatters, then, as a rock strikes the boy's cheek, thrown by the crowd—as pale skin stains red—as Eret turns and sees her own father's hand still outstretched. His eyes are cold—nothing like the sky blue turned grey as the boy turns his head away, hair falling to curtain his face in shadow. There's no mercy to be found when she looks to her family—her mother's brow knit, her cheeks flushed with fury. Her father's voice is gruff and low as he shouts profanities, waving a fist at the line of people as they walk past.

He's not the only one.

"Criminals!"

"Murderers!"

"Monsters!"

"Thieves!"

"Go to hell where you belong, pirates!"

They say worse. So much worse. Her father's hand brushes against hers as he swings it sharply back to his side and she recoils—his anger roiling like flames, burning hot to the touch. It's overwhelming, every emotion swirling around her, rage and disgust and terror that doesn't belong to her, all coiling in her stomach like a snake ready to strike. She claps a hand over her mouth as the tears begin to flow white-hot from her eyes, blurring her vision until she can no longer see the faces of the people around her—until she loses sight of the boy.

She cries long after the pirates are led out of sight.

Eret tries to forget what she saw. Tries to pretend she doesn't know the fate of the people she saw all those weeks ago. It's easier to pretend than to face the truth—than to picture the face of the boy in the same position as all of the pirates who have come to this port before him. She brushes it off and once more ignores the tugging in her heart, the familiar call of something greater trying to steer her hands.

But fate has ways of pulling the strings.

There's a boy in the alley beside Eret's home.

Sheltering in an overturned crate, he watches him shiver from his window—his blonde hair matted and tangled with mud, his pale skin dirty with faded streaks of red. Rain patters lightly outside, a gentle drizzle, and he watches as the boy's hands reach out, cupped together, trying desperately to gather water in his palms. His wrists are reddened and bruised as his shirt pulls away from them, revealing fragile skin that is chafed to the point of bleeding. He flinches at every movement nearby, every sound—every laugh from the passersby ducking beneath their umbrellas outside of the alley, every clop of a horse's hoof as the carts roll past from the marketplace.

He doesn't need to see his face to recognize him.

It's the boy from before.

The pirate.

Somehow, he's escaped. Eret can see the fear in the way he curls close to himself—doesn't need to hold his hand to know he's terrified. He doesn't need his powers to know he's also hungry—and thirsty, too. And so he hoists up his skirt, laces his boots, and sneaks out of his home in the cool evening air and the muddy pavement with a glass of water in his hand and an apple tucked beneath his arm.

The boy startles when he hears him. He tenses like a stray cat ready to flee, cowering in the box as he draws near. Though he does his best to seem friendly, it's clear the boy doesn't trust him. Eret crouches a few meters away from him, across the alley, and for a moment they just sit, staring at one another, daring each other to make the first move.

It's Eret who speaks first.

"That looks like it hurts," Eret says softly, gesturing to the red welt beneath the boy's collarbone. It's blistered and swollen and awful—a brand in the shape of a 'P', and every bit of it screams agony. The boy looks down at it, and his eyes start to shine as he quickly tugs his shirt overtop of it, hiding it away from Eret's prying eyes.

"It's nothing," he says, his voice raspy and weak.

Eret doesn't push.

"Here," he says instead, holding out the glass. Blue eyes widen, and he can see the battle in the boy's eyes—torn between his distrust and his thirst. His thirst wins out, though, and he takes the glass in trembling hands and begins to gulp, drinking as though he's running on nothing but the earlier rainwater. Looking at his slender frame, all skin and bones and jutting angles, Eret's not sure that's far from the truth.

No need to feed a prisoner who's set to die soon anyway.

"Go slowly," he encourages, and the older boy shoots him a sharp glare, one hand lifting as though to guard the water from Eret. "Calm down—I'm not going to take it, silly. You'll just

make yourself sick, that's all." He laughs, inching back a few steps to give the pirate some space. "Don't worry. I'm not going to turn you in. You're safe here."

The boy eyes him dubiously.

Eret cracks a sheepish grin.

"Well—as safe as you can be." His brow furrows, his tongue poking out from between his teeth as he squints at his new friend. "Hey. How'd you get out, anyway? They let you go?"

The boy shakes his head. He doesn't answer for a long while, still greedily gulping the water. When it's gone, he stares mournfully at the empty glass for a few moments before lifting his gaze to meet Eret's, blue eyes dull and full of sorrow.

"...They said they'd be right behind me," he says, fists clenching tight.

"Oh," Eret says. *So he did break out.* "They'll probably be at the docks then, right?"

He shakes his head.

"They—" His mouth opens and closes wordlessly. He looks close to tears. "They dug me out. I fit through the crack, but they—they couldn't. My mom—she said to run. She told me to keep running, to—to not look back."

"Oh," Eret says again, suddenly feeling very small. He doesn't know what to do, not when the older boy begins to sniffle, scrubbing at his eyes with dirtied sleeves, muffling the whimpers that threaten to spill out. And so he offers his hand, his palm soft and unscarred next to calloused, blood-streaked knuckles, and after only a brief moment of hesitation, the boy takes it.

All at once, Eret feels *too much*.

He doesn't let go, though, even as the boy's emotions flood over him—sorrow, horror, white-hot *rage*—and pain, so much pain. There's physical pain, yes—there's no ignoring the molten burn of the brand across his skin—but there's so much more than that. He feels the love for his crew, as strongly as he loves his own family, and he feels the bitter regret for those left behind, the lingering traces of a mother's love.

"...I can help you," is what he manages to whisper, when the tightness in his chest fades to a dull ache and he can finally breathe again.

"*How?*" the boy asks, and his eyes look so lost—so hopeless, the spark from so many weeks ago on the streets gone, replaced by something hollow and tired.

Something flickers again in Eret's chest.

Determination.

"First," he says. "You're going to eat this." He presses the apple into the boy's hand, ignoring the confused noise he makes. "You're going to need your strength if you want to rescue them,

right?”

It’s a lie. They both know it. The boy can’t do anything against the power of the Navy—he’s little more than a child himself, unarmed and weak as a newborn kitten from his captivity. But Eret can’t let him sit here—can’t bear to see this boy, a mirror of himself, *give up*. Not if he can give him a chance. Not if he can give him *hope*.

The boy watches him for a few minutes, hesitating. It’s clear he sees the futility of it, too, but at Eret’s smile, his lips twitch with one of his own. Something warm blossoms between them, trust beginning to kindle, and he can feel the way the boy slowly softens at the pact they’ve made, this grim understanding, his careful guard finally beginning to drop. He stares down at the apple for a few moments before taking a small, tentative bite.

“There you go!” Eret chirps, clapping his hands together with delight. The other kid is practically skin and bones, and an apple won’t do much in the long run, but at least he’s eating *something*. He lets him finish a few bites before preparing to launch into his haphazard plan, to his credit only shivering a little as the rain begins to pour down around them in earnest. The boy, though, notices, and scoots to the side, leaving an open space beside him. His offer is clear, and Eret gratefully takes it. Together, the two children huddle in the crate, a meager shelter from the storm outside. Eret clings to him, and the racing of his heart dies down as the other kid’s tension eases into something akin to the flutter of a bird’s wings, soft and hopeful, not daring to believe.

“The courtyard,” Eret starts, and the boy tilts his head curiously, not understanding. “There’s a courtyard, where they—ah—usually do the hangings. They’d spot you if you went in with the crowd, but...” His hand clenches at his sides at the rush of awful memories. “I used to sneak out to watch them, while my parents were at the market. There’s a spot at the wall where you can climb it and see what’s happening.”

The boy nods slowly, stiffly. He doesn’t interject, so Eret pushes onward.

“If you want, I can take you there.” He hesitates for a moment, casting a glance back at his home. He shudders at the thought of his parents catching him with a pirate. It’s bad enough he’s gone and gotten his skirt and boots filthy with mud, he’s already in for a tongue lashing at the least. He swallows, his mouth suddenly dry. “I don’t—I don’t think I can stay to help, but I can show you how to get there. Maybe you can distract them, or...”

The boy nods.

Or at least say goodbye.

“Thank you,” he says softly. Genuinely.

“You’re welcome,” he answers, though he wishes he could do more.

They’re only children, though. What can they do against the people who would have them hang for their very existence? For something beyond their control? They come from different lives, will walk different paths, and yet they both would face the noose together, standing shoulder to shoulder while a crowd of faces awaited their deaths.

Eret wonders if his parents would be there. If his father would throw a stone at him as they walked him down the streets to the courtyard. If his mother would cry, or if she's come to terms with that fate that seems inevitable to her. If he'd fear death, or smile through it, like the old woman who'd come to the shop so long ago.

Eret finds that he doesn't want to think about it anymore.

"Right," he says instead, once the boy has finished. A bell tolls overhead, echoing across the cobblestone streets and cutting through the sound of the rain, calling the town to bear witness to the executions. Eret steels himself, stepping once more out into the downpour, looking up toward the stone wall on the hill, toward the path he long ago memorized. He offers a hand to the boy, who takes it, hauled up onto his feet and into the rain. Eret doesn't let go, grasping tight.

"Since I gave you food and all, I think it's only fair that we're friends now," he says. The boy looks startled, but his blue eyes soon soften, tentative warmth renewing in him in a way that only makes Eret's smile grow.

"That... sounds fair," the boy replies, staring down at their intertwined hands with evident confusion.

"I'm Eret," he says, shaking the boy's hand slowly and dramatically, cracking a grin at the chuckles this elicits. "Nice to meet you."

The boy finally smiles. It's small and tentative, but *real*.

"...I'm Phil."

The walk to the courtyard's wall takes only minutes, but it feels like hours. By the time they've both made the climb, they're both panting for breath. It isn't made any easier by the slowly sinking stone in Eret's gut, or the tremble in Phil's legs with every step. Nevertheless, he guides the boy to the wall—to the treacherous handholds he's scaled a dozen times before.

"You should be able to see from here," he says solemnly, and Phil's breath catches sharply, as though he's only just realizing what he is about to witness. Surprisingly, the boy doesn't cry—instead, only looking up to the wall with grim understanding, his whole body stiff with sorrow.

"I wish this was just a bad dream," Phil says, with a voice rough and hoarse and pitching with every syllable. His hair has fallen to hang in front of his eyes, plastered, sodden, to his cheeks. His hands shake violently at his sides, and yet still, he doesn't break. It's as though he's numb, unfeeling in the face of tragedy, and the sight makes Eret's heart splinter beneath the weight of it.

Phil may not cry, but Eret does.

“I’m sorry,” he says around the tears pricking at his eyes. “I’m so sorry, Phil.”

“It’s okay,” Phil says.

“It’s *not*.”

Phil doesn’t answer.

“You should go,” he says instead, with a false smile. “Your parents are probably looking for you, right?”

“Yeah,” Eret says, already dreading what will face him when he gets back home, with tattered clothes and no excuse for his absence. “But—are you going to be okay?”

Phil shakes his head. The smile remains.

“I’ll be fine,” he lies, and Eret doesn’t try to correct him. It won’t help anyone—won’t change the inevitable. His heart aches for this boy—for this stranger he’d met mere hours ago—the stranger that has already changed his life in so many ways. He wishes he could do something to stop this, but this is all he can do. He hopes that this will help, somehow, that if nothing else Phil will find closure. He hopes he’ll be able to forget this one day, that he’ll be able to sleep without the guilt following him into his dreams.

They’re both too young to have seen so much death. They’re too young to shoulder the blame.

Phil takes a deep, trembling breath. He steps toward the wall, and Eret follows—reaching out to grab his shoulder, forcing the boy to face him one last time.

“You can do this,” Eret says to Phil.

He can’t.

Phil smiles again. Eret feels a hollow ache in his chest as the boy reaches out a hand to shake, and his fingers curl around his new friend’s one last time. In the gesture, he feels all of Phil—his terror, his anguish, his pain. He makes a decision.

He pulls Phil into a hug instead.

The boy is stiff for a moment, and Eret scarcely dares to breathe, worried he’s made a mistake. But then Phil is hugging him back, burying his face into his shoulder, clinging to him as if the very world is about to slip away beneath his feet—and it is. When they finally pull apart, Phil’s eyes are suspiciously wet, even as he squares his shoulders and stares down at their still intertwined hands.

“I’ll see you around,” Eret says softly.

“Yeah.”

“...Good luck, Phil. Safe passage.”

Phil's hand squeezes his.

"Safe passage, Eret."

With one last look and a hopeful smile, Eret turns and begins to walk down the winding path back to the city streets. He returns home as the rain begins to ease, as the clouds begin to part, as the sun begins to crest through the storm, and as the bell tolls far in the distance, announcing the beginning of something terrible.

He doesn't look back.

He hears the news of the successful execution the next morning.

There's no avoiding it. It's the latest news of the town—the gossip on every passerby's lips. *Justice*, some call it. *Cruelty*, Eret would object, though he keeps his tongue firmly between his teeth. Eret's heart breaks for the boy. He longs to find him—to comfort him. He regrets not being there for him, regrets not staying a little longer. He searches for him, up and down the city streets, looking for a boy huddled in an alley, or in a box, or weaving through the crowds. No matter where he looks, though, he can't seem to find Phil anywhere. He wanders the marketplace, keeping his eyes open for a familiar tangle of blonde hair, but finds nothing. *No one*.

He's already left.

There's a ship on the horizon as Eret makes his way to the docks. Its sails billow in the wind, pushing it toward the great blue sea, away from port. As Eret stands at the edge, toes curling around the old wood, the cool ocean breeze in his lungs and the taste of salt on his tongue, he pretends he can see a figure standing at the bow of the ship. If he closes his eyes, he can imagine he's there, too, the steady rock of the hull beneath his feet and the ripple of the sails far above him.

He hopes Phil is on it. Chasing his freedom, escaping his chains—following his heart, answering the call of the sea. Maybe he'll even find peace, one day.

Eret lifts a hand toward the rising sun and waves goodbye.

"See you around, Phil," he says, and watches until the ship vanishes from sight.

After that, everything is different.

Eret no longer sees the world like they once did—shining and perfect, through the naive eyes of a child. Everything is unfamiliar now, almost *foreign*, and they know nothing will ever be

the same for them again. The black and white shades are now grey, the line in the sand blurred. The townspeople no longer seem like friends—in fact, they're more like strangers. Eret's not sure that they ever truly knew them at all.

There's nobody to talk to. No way to confide that won't have them scorned or hanged.

Pity for a *criminal*?

They'd be lucky not to be deemed one themselves.

Although—it wouldn't be entirely inaccurate, not anymore. Eret wonders what would drive a person to a life of piracy—to a world of thievery and violence and life on the run, a life of near-exile from any modest civilization. They wonder, briefly, what it would feel like to dash through the streets, on the run from the Navy, ducking and weaving and laughing. They wonder what it would feel like to hold a sword in one hand, what it would feel like to climb the rigging of a ship or stand in the crow's nest, high above.

They wonder, and they *wonder*, and soon, that wondering turns to a steady itch. A twitch of the fingers here, a tapping of their foot there.

And so they get into trouble.

They're first arrested for stealing when they're little older than thirteen. They didn't need it—they had no use for stealing a string of pearls around a noblewoman's throat, save for the exhilaration of knowing that they *could*. The thrill of the chase had been worth the time behind bars, before their parents, well-known and beloved by the community, were able to plead their way to their early release. They'd been scolded and punished by their parents and the warden alike, and yet...

They hadn't stopped there.

It becomes a pastime. A hobby, of sorts. They stop making simple mistakes—they stop getting caught. Anything to keep their hands busy, anything to keep the boredom of a monotonous life away. But even that gets old, eventually.

Eret, above all else, has never been one to *sit still*, and as the years pass, tending to their parents' shop becomes a burden, a restraint against everything else they want to do, everything they want to *try*. They still want to help their family—of course they do, but every day they stare out their window and long for a change of pace, a new challenge.

They read books. They help at the docks—attend trials and political events—write about all that they've seen and done and yet still, it's not enough.

They need something new.

They need *freedom*.

Two years later, Eret, a self-christened adult, just fifteen years old, leaves home for the very first time on a merchant's ship, with nothing more than the change in their pocket and the shawl around their shoulders. They buy passage to the next port, and in their heart they carry the hope of a new life, the promise of a fresh start as the sun begins to crest over the horizon, painting the sky in shades of pink and gold.

They never return to the little port by the ocean. They never return to their parents, or the quaint little store they grew up in.

Home isn't home. Not anymore.

Home is the sea.

End Notes

have fanart, theories, or just wanna share your thoughts about the fic? use the hashtag #BonesAU on twitter, tumblr, or instagram!

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